

Sport Participation of LGBT and Their Allies in Nagoya

Frequency, gender division, and an alternative arena

Alisa TAKASHIMA & Chikako MATSUSHITA

Abstract

This paper attempts to address the problems and possibilities in the current situation of LGBT people's sport participation in Japan, with a special focus on transgender athletes. By analysing qualitative data collected at a LGBT pride parade, we aim to investigate the frequency of sport participation by transgender athletes as well as their preferred and obligatory gender on participating in competitive sport events. Also, the recognition rate of Gay Games was measured in search of an alternative sporting arena for Japanese LGBT people. Results show that gender preference and experience of competitive sports differ among transgender people; however, some do seem to feel anxious or hesitant when participating. The community seems to expect respect and recognition towards gender/sexual diversity and personal preferences as well as inherent physical differences from sport events, but the ideal method to achieve this in terms of competitive sport does not appear to be unified. The majority of the respondents, especially those who participate in competitive sports and are interested in the Olympics, seemed attracted by the quality of the Gay Games despite its low recognition rate, which may signify a possible alternative temporary solution for the current sporting environment.

Introduction

It has been claimed by many that the current sporting environment is not necessarily comfortable for LGBT people, especially if the athlete does not comply with traditional gender binaries. In this paper, we have attempted to address this problem by revealing the sporting experiences and expectations of the LGBT community within Japan, in relation to gender division preferences of transgender athletes and recognition of the Gay Games.

Regarding the Japanese society, Kazama et al. (2011) has demonstrated the problematic situation of the current sporting environment in schools, in which the LGBT people recalled encountering heterosexism and homophobia as a student while attending physical education classes or sport clubs. These negative attitudes towards LGBT

students sometimes involved physical violence. In the current heteronormative sporting environment, LGBT students are prone to experience unwanted anxiety.

In our previous study (Matsushita & Takashima, 2017), through the analysis of a quantitative survey on LGBT people and straight allies, we examined the tolerance towards participation of transgender and intersex athletes in sport events at different athletic levels. Results show that the tolerance level towards transgender and intersex athletes decreases as the competitiveness of the sport event increases. In other words, people are more reluctant to approve transgender and intersex athletes competing in the female division of the Olympics than they are for local sporting events.

As observable from the recurring changes in policy by the International Olympic Committee (Matsushita & Takashima, 2017), major sports events are currently in the process of deciding on whether to include or exclude transgender and intersex athletes, especially in the female division of their competition. Meanwhile, a more drastic approach has been explored as a countermeasure for gender dichotomy in such sporting competitions as the Gay Games. The Gay Games is the world's largest quadrennial LGBT sporting and cultural event, which has been continuously promoting inclusiveness regardless of one's sexuality and gender since 1982. Gay Games 9 in 2014 drew 30,000 participants, including volunteers and visitors (The Cleveland Foundation, n.d.). Currently, the Gay Games employs a strategy of implementing a "mixed" category besides the traditional male and female divisions. Although the Gay Games is a rather western-based event at the present stage, it may be considered that such a significant LGBT sporting environment could benefit the Japanese community with positive sporting experiences.

It is a requisite to understand the sporting experiences and preferences of LGBT individuals as they may continue to participate in sports throughout their adulthood. Our interest is therefore to investigate the current sporting environment in which post-schooling (high school graduate equivalent) LGBT people participate, especially in relation to their experiences on gender division and their hopes for an alternative sporting system. Although the current study is relatively small in terms of its sampling, some contribution of acquiring insight on the current situation is anticipated.

Methodology

The current study is based on data collected at a booth installed in the main event hall of “Nagoya Rainbow Parade”. The parade took place in Nagoya, Aichi, Japan on 17th September, 2016 with estimated participants of approximately 1000. Out of 93 responses collected from event participants and organisers who came across the booth, responses from people who were of foreign nationality, under the age of 18, or had missing values in the face sheet were excluded for the purpose of enabling comparisons with previous studies, amounting to a net number of 89 responses, with a response rate of 95.7%. The average age was 31.74 with a standard deviation of 11.69, where the majority (48.3%) were in their 20s. 38.2% of the respondents were cisgender heterosexuals who can be considered straight allies, and the rest (61.8%) were LGBT people. In terms of gender identity, 30.3% responded as male, 40.4% female, 9.0% MtF transgender, 12.4% FtM transgender, and 7.9% as other/undecided. Further details on the demographics of respondents are given in Fig. 1.

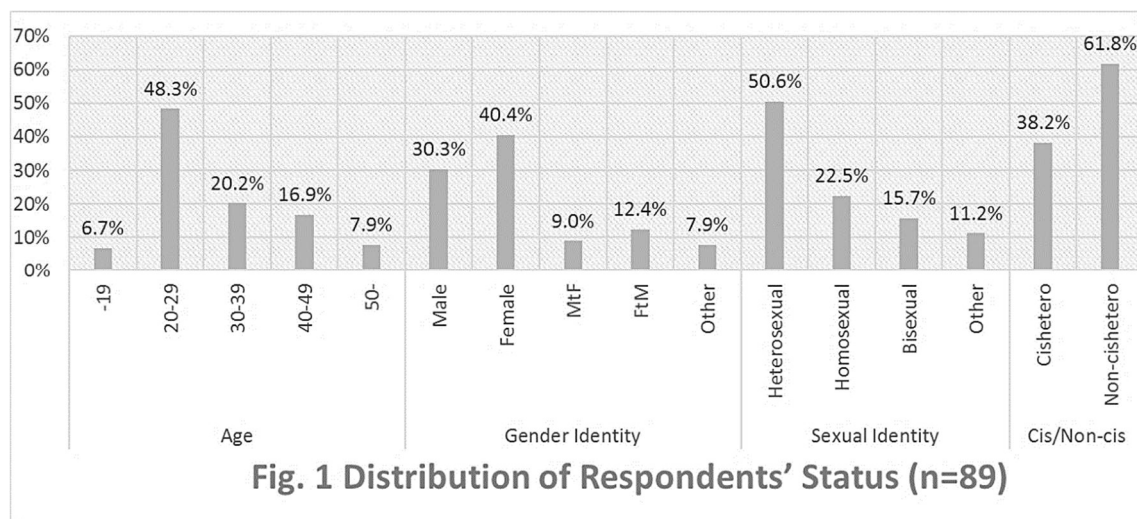


Fig. 1 Distribution of Respondents' Status (n=89)

In this survey, the sporting practices of participants were measured at two different levels: 1) general sports, which also include individual exercise such as yoga or hiking; and 2) competitive sports, which is limited to participating in or practicing for competitions regulated by official rules. Individuals were asked to choose the closest answer to their frequency of participating at each level out of six choices: 1) more than 3 times a week, 2) once or twice a week, 3) once or twice a month, 4) a few times a year, 5) only in the past, and 6) never. The responses for 1, 2, 3, and 4 were combined into “more than once a year”, and 1 and 2 were combined into “more than once a week” for the purpose of comparing with a prior study by Sasagawa (2014).

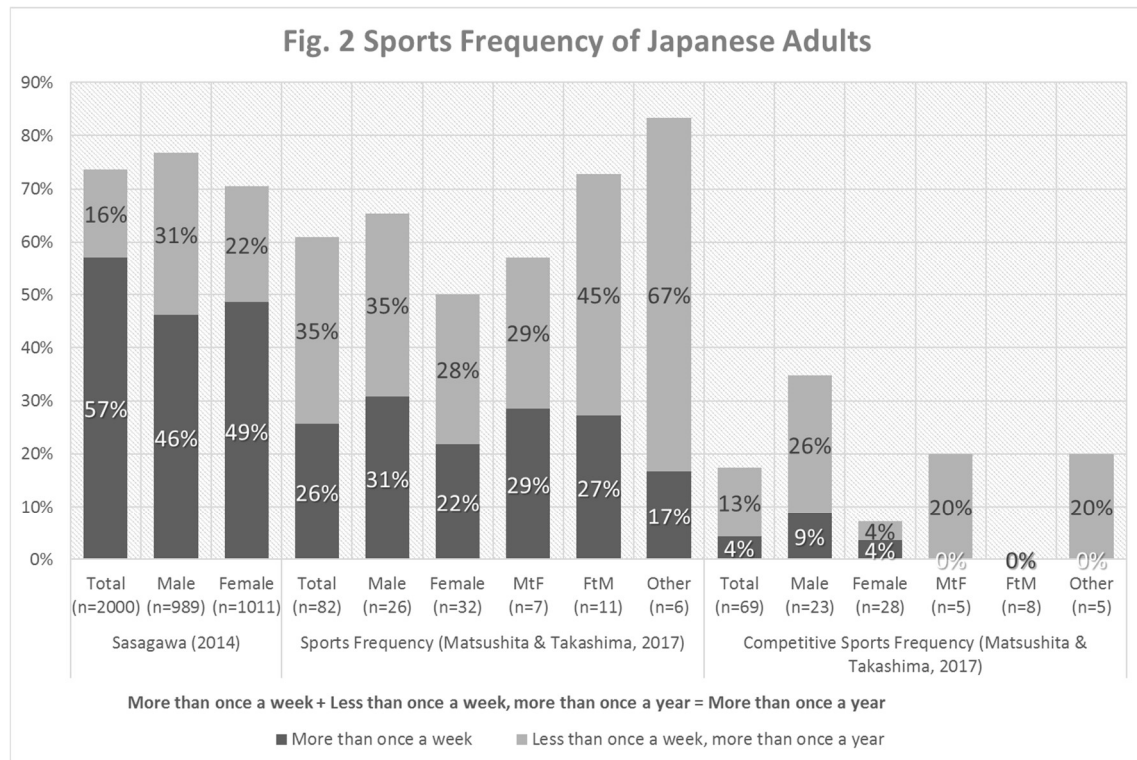
The transgender respondents were then asked to choose their preferred and obligatory gender on participating in sport events. The questions specifically were: 1) “What gender do you prefer when competing in sport events?”, and 2) “What gender do you actually participate as when competing in sport events?”. The available choices were: 1) male, 2) female, 3) other (with space to provide further description), and 4) do not participate.

The transgender respondents were also asked about their difficulties in participating in the division of their perceived gender. However, since the responses from MtFs were extremely limited, only the results from FtM participants will be discussed in the current study. Towards the FtM respondents, five items were labelled under the question “What difficulties have you experienced when participating in the male division?”: 1) I feel male opponents are going easy on me, 2) I feel physically weaker than men, 3) I feel opponents are reluctant to compete with me, 4) I feel my teammates expect me to act feminine, and 5) I feel I am being targeted by my opponents. Each item was measured on a 7 point Linkert-type scale anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Finally, we asked all respondents a few questions regarding the Gay Games. Each respondent was handed a brochure of the Gay Games to read before answering these questions. The first question given was a yes/no question, “Have you ever heard of the Gay Games?”. This was followed by “Would you like to participate in the event?” where respondents were to answer from three different perspectives: 1) participate as an athlete, 2) participate as a spectator, and 3) participate in cultural events. Each item was measured on a 5 point Linkert-type scale anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), which was then reversed upon analysing the results. We also asked them to freely describe their impression on the gender division system with the question, “In Gay Games, there are three gender divisions: male, female, and mixed. Please describe how you think about this”.

Results

As a first step in evaluating the collected data, we looked at the frequency of sports and competitive sports participation of transgender individuals in comparison with cisgender males and females. The resulting percentages in accordance with gender are shown in Fig. 2 along with data retrieved from Sasagawa (2014).



In comparison with the data reported by Sasagawa (2014)¹, which represents the whole population of Japan (however seemingly does not consider gender ambiguity), the total ratio of the sporting population within our respondents are generally lower. In Sasagawa's data, a total of 73% are reported to practice sports more than once a year, where 78% of them (57% of the total sample) participate in sports more than once a week. On the other hand, our data shows that 61% of the respondents practice sport more than once a year, while less than half (43%) do so more than once a week. However, a similar tendency can still be observed, where more males (in Sasagawa: 77%, our data: 66%) are participating in sports than females (in Sasagawa: 71%, our data: 50%). This difference grows wider in the frequency of competitive sports participation (35% males, 8% females). In terms of transgender respondents, 58% MtF transgenders practiced sports more than once a year, whereas half of them (29% of total) participated more than once a week, and out of 72% FtM transgenders who practice sports more than once a year, 38% (27% of total) participated more than once a week. Although this participation rate seems rather significant, the number drops in the competitive sports frequency, where only 20% of MtFs, and 0% of FtMs participate more than once a year.

¹ Transcribed data retrieved from Japan Society for Sport and Gender Studies, ed. (2016).

As for the preferred and obligatory gender upon sporting participation of transgender individuals, the percentages of responses from 8 MtFs and 10 FtMs are shown in Fig. 3-4 and Fig. 5-6.

Fig. 3 MtF's Preferred Gender in Sports (n=8)

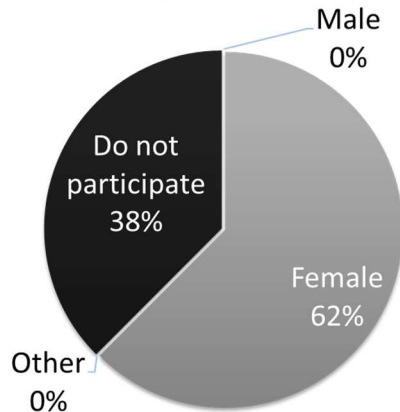


Fig. 4 MtF's Gender in Actual Participation (n=8)

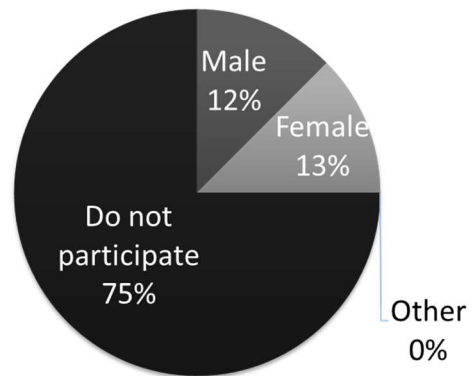


Fig. 5 FtM's Preferred Gender in Sports (n=10)

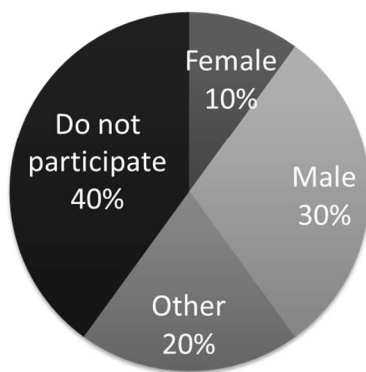
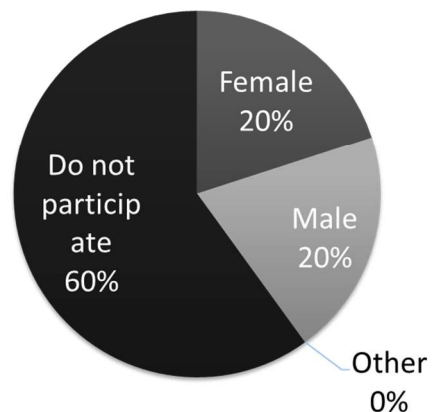


Fig. 6 FtM's Gender in Actual Participation (n=10)

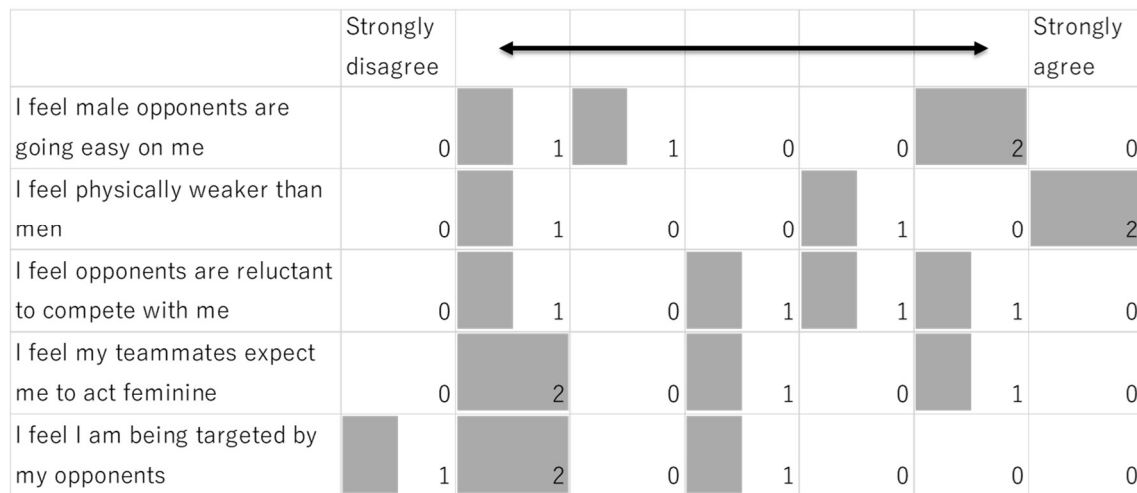


Out of 8 MtF respondents, 5 (62%) chose the female division as a preference upon competing in sport events in accordance with their perceived gender, and the rest (38%) chose not to participate. However, in reality, only 1 respondent (13%) was participating as female, another person as male, and the rest chose not to participate, increasing the number of non-participants to 75%. The reason for this increase is presumably related to the expected difficulties of participating in the female division. A similar increase in the “do not participate” can also be seen in the FtM’s responses, where

an extra 20% (40% in preferred, 60% in actual participation) chose not to participate in reality. However, the preference itself has some variety in comparison to the MtF's response, where 1 of them (10%) preferred the female division, 3 (30%) preferred the male division, and 2 (20%) sought other options. The other options, as one respondent indicated, could be a sporting event with only FtM athletes as participants.

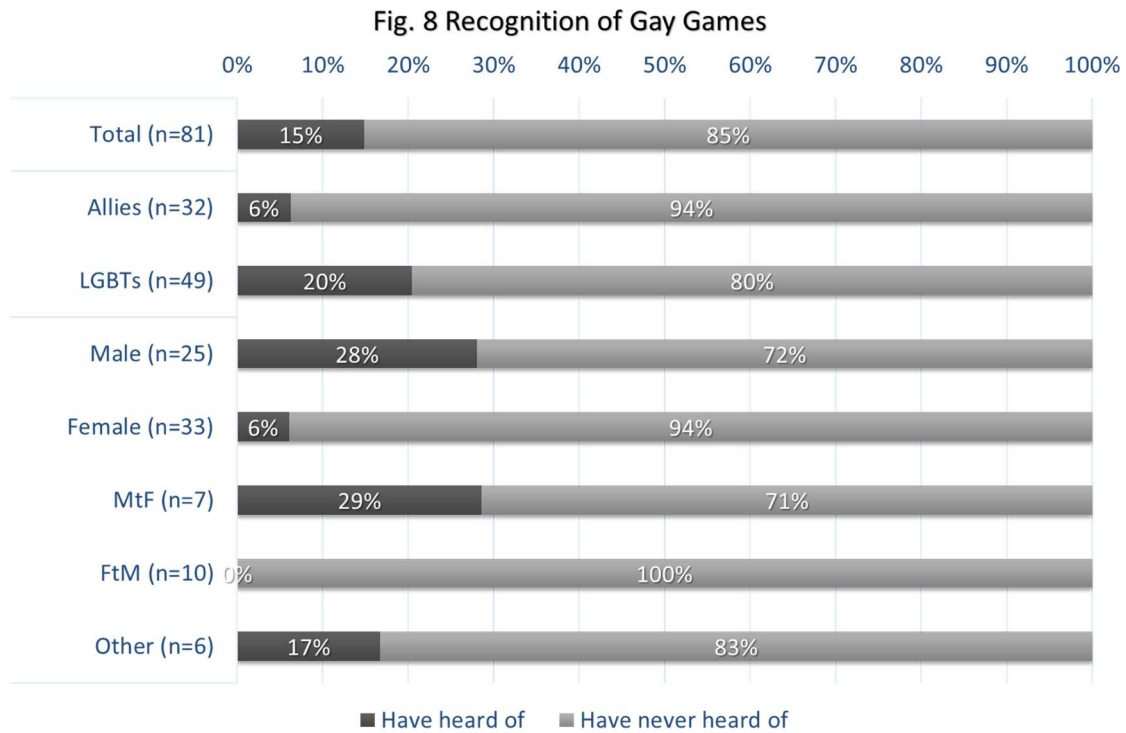
In the evaluation of FtM's experience in the male division of competitive sport events, results show a variety in each individual's experience, although the number is extremely limited. Responses from 4 FtM respondents who participate (or have participated) in the male division are shown in Fig. 7.

Fig. 7 FtM Athlete's Experiences in Competitive Sport Events



To give a brief overview, for the first question, “I feel male opponents are going easy on me”, 2 are closer to disagreeing, and 2 are closer to agreeing. For the second question, “I feel physically weaker than men”, 1 is closer to disagreeing, and 3 are closer to agreeing. For the third question, “I feel opponents are reluctant to compete with me”, 1 is closer to disagreeing, 1 is neutral, and 2 are closer to agreeing. For the fourth question, “I feel my teammates expect me to act feminine”, 2 are closer to disagreeing, 1 is neutral, and 1 is closer to agreeing. For the fifth question, “I feel I am being targeted by my opponents”, 3 are closer to disagreeing, and 1 is neutral. Again, the numbers of respondents are insufficient for any generalization, however the variety seen in each experience along with the fact that some of them indeed do feel incapable or concerned while participating in sports does suggest a need for re-examining the sporting environment for FtM transgender athletes.

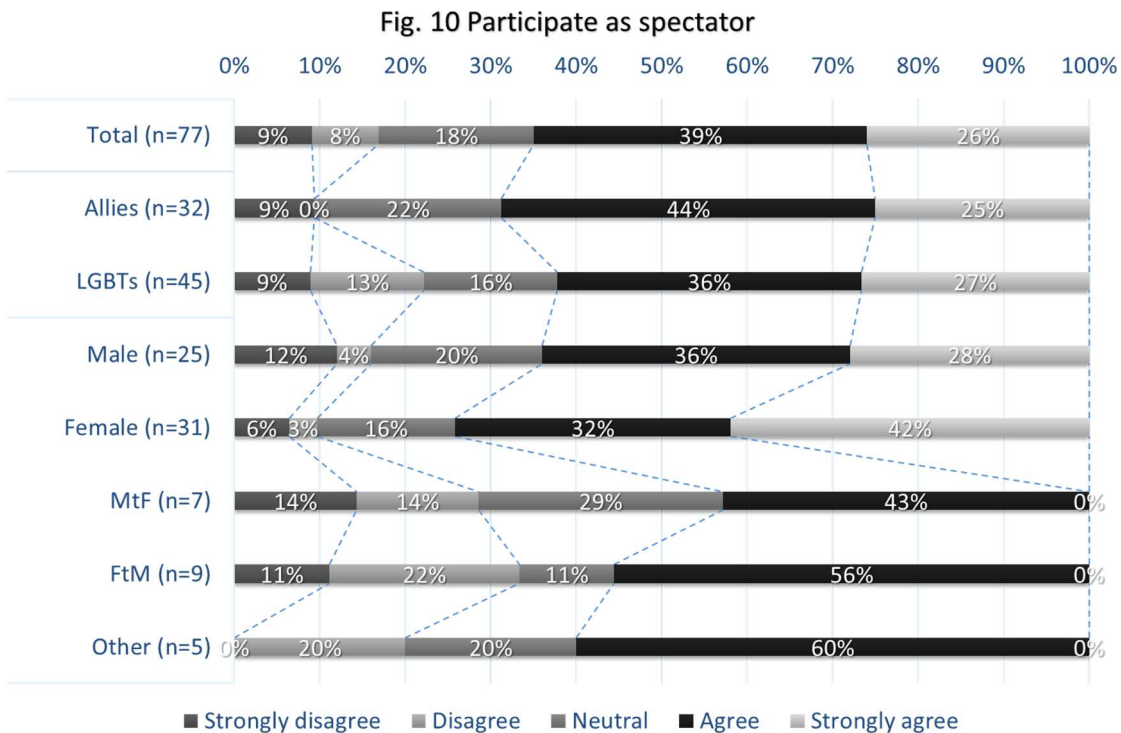
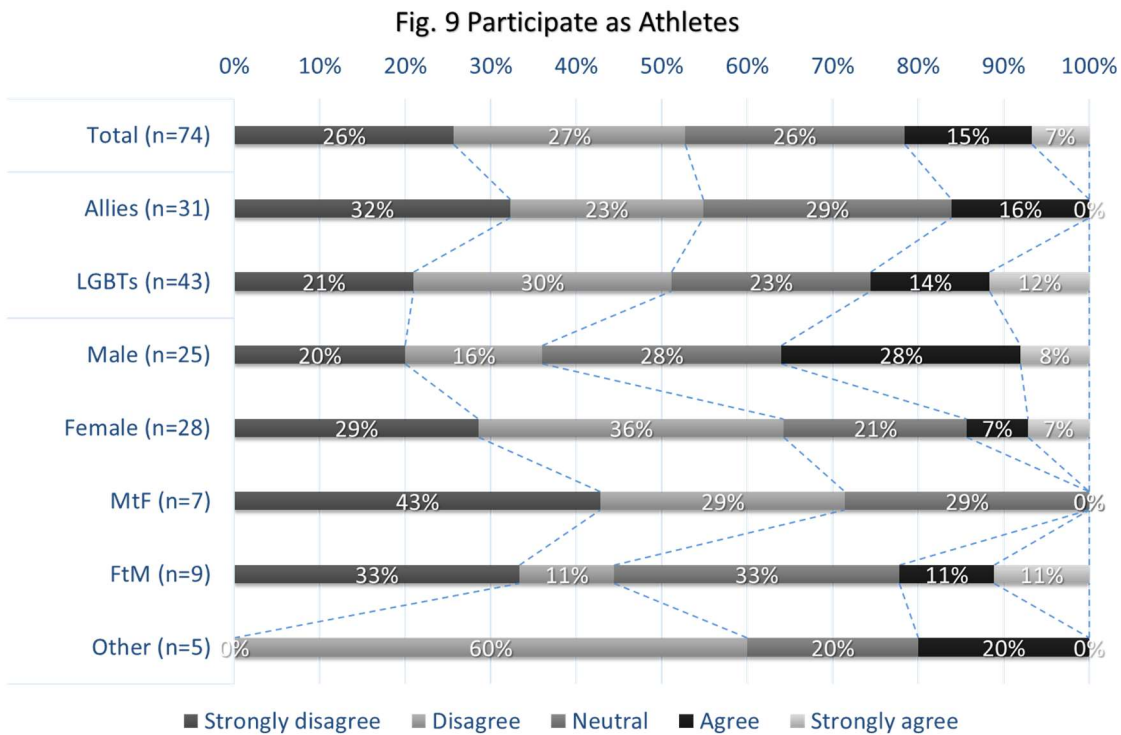
In search for an alternative arena for LGBT people's sport participation, we investigated the amount of recognition of the Gay Games. The results are indicated in Fig. 8, also in accordance with the respondents' sexuality and gender.

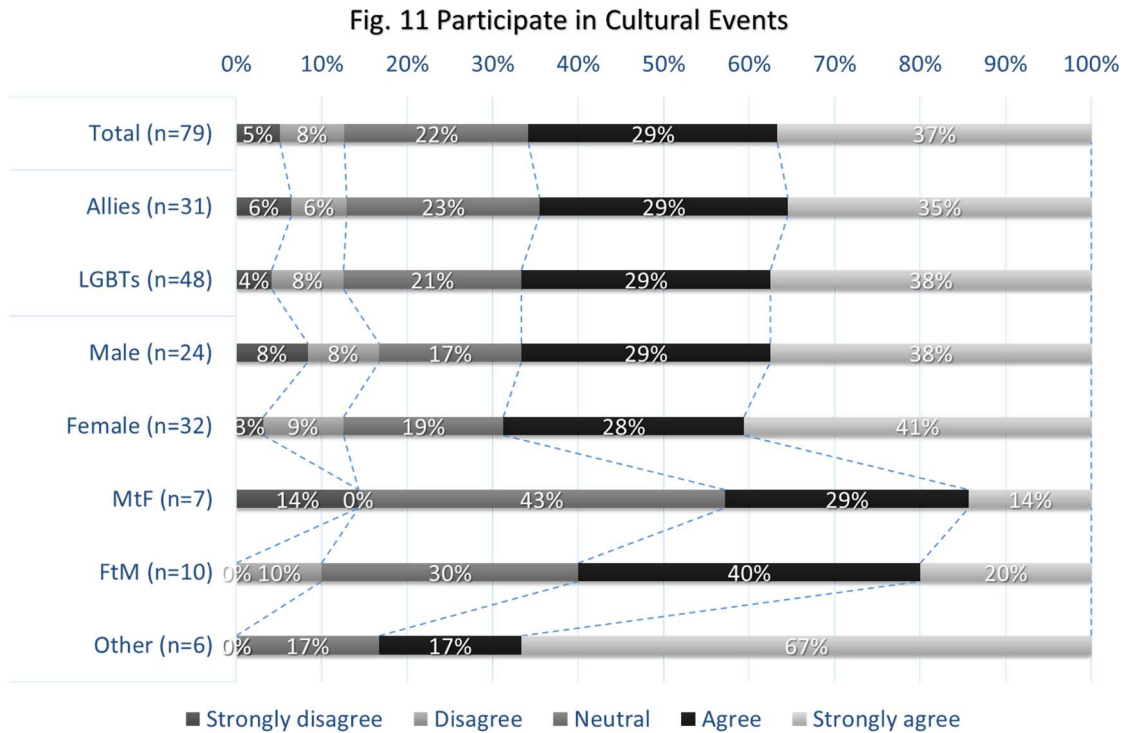


Although our respondents belonged to the LGBT supporting community, and therefore would possibly be more informed about such events as the Gay Games, surprisingly only 15% of total participants recognised its name. 94% of the cisgender, heterosexual people (allies) had never heard of the Gay Games, and 80% of the LGBT people did not know either. When looked at in more detail by each gender, cisgender males (28%) and MtFs (29%) were the most informed, followed by people of other/undecided gender (17%), cisgender females (6%), and finally FtMs (0%). It may be recognised that this pattern follows, to some extent, what has been seen in the frequency of participating in competitive sports (Fig. 2). The cause-and-effect relationship between the ill-informed state and hesitant sport participation cannot be specified at this stage; however, the advertisement of the Gay Games still seem to remain an important task within the Japanese LGBT community.

In response to the distributed brochure of the Gay Games, we asked all respondents to what extent would they like to participate in the event, from three

different perspectives: in sport events as an athlete (Fig. 9), in the stadium as a spectator (Fig. 10), and in other cultural events (Fig. 11).





Even though the Gay Games was not very well known among the respondents, the level of interest seems nonetheless high. In total, more people indicated that they would agree/strongly agree to participate as spectators (65%) or in cultural events (66%) than as athletes (22%). When comparing the allies and LGBT people, more LGBT people (26%) agreed/strongly agreed to participate as athletes than allies (16%). However, attending as spectators was slightly more preferred by allies (69%) than LGBT people (63%). LGBT people (67%) were more interested in participating in cultural events than allies (64%). The transgenders, however, seem to be rather unenthusiastic overall. Although the numbers of the respondents are again very limited, it is notable that none of the MtFs agreed/strongly agreed on wanting to participate as athletes. Also, MtF and FtM transgenders, along with people of other/undecided gender, did not have people who strongly affirmed their liking of participating as spectators. As for the cultural events, 14% strongly disagreed to attend, which is seemingly significant in comparison with the 4% in LGBT people and 5% in the total sample. 43% of MtFs agreed/strongly agreed on wanting to attend, which again seems much less than 67% of LGBT people and 66% in total. FtMs are 60%, which is also relatively small. Although generalization is difficult with this limited number of samples, in our data, a tendency of transgender individuals being rather unenthusiastic about attending the Gay Games was seen in all three perspectives.

For the purpose of investigating the relationship between interest in general sporting activities and interest in the Gay Games, we conducted a correlation analysis regarding each aspect. Results are shown in Table. 1.

Table. 1 Correlation between interest in Gay Games, sports frequency and Olympics			
	Sports frequency	Competitive sports frequency	Interest in Olympics (Matsushita & Takashima, 2017)
Participate as athletes	.187 n = 79	.293* n = 68	.279* n = 80
Participate as spectators	.264* n = 82	.288* n = 71	.408** n = 83
Participate in cultural events	.192 n = 84	.292* n = 72	.239* n = 85
*significant at 5% level; **significant at 1% level			

Overall, the frequency with which the respondents participate in competitive sports in comparison with general sports frequency showed more correlation. A weak correlation can be observed between competitive sports frequency and all three aspects (participate as athletes: 0.293*, participate as spectators: 0.288*, and participate in cultural events: 0.292*), whereas a weak correlation is only seen in attending as spectators (0.264*) for sports frequency. More interestingly, interest in the Olympics (data derived from our previous work) shows correlation with each aspect, where participating as athletes (0.279*) and in cultural events (0.239*) are weak correlations, and participating as spectators (0.408**) appears to have a significant at 1% level correlation. These results signify that the Gay Games appeal to those who participate in competitive sports, and also to those who are interested in the Olympics.

In analysing the responses towards the three gender division system of the Gay Games, we have counted and categorized the various opinions into four different categories. Out of a total of 47 responses, 28 expressed their agreement on this division system with reasons that such a system would broaden the choices of participants according to their strength, shows respect for individual gender identity, and brings enjoyment to the event. 12 preferred different categorization, where some claimed that there should be more categories, also in relation to aspects other than gender, while

others claimed that there should not be any categories at all. People on both sides seemed to reason their opinions with its respectfulness towards the athlete's preference. 3 preferred the traditional male/female dichotomous categorization; however, their opinions on whether the transgender athletes should attend in accordance with their physical body or perceived gender varied. The remaining 4 people questioned the naming of "Gay" games to be rather non-inclusive, or else did not give a meaningful response.

Discussion

Our results overall signify the variety in transgender individuals' sporting experiences and the opinions on inclusive sporting environment within the LGBT community. Transgender individuals are generally less likely to participate in competitive sport events, for they may not necessarily be able to attend in their preferred gender, and even if they do, still may experience anxiety. Gender verification testing required in high level competitions, which we have addressed in our previous work (Matsushita & Takashima, 2017), may also add to this point. As a temporary solution to such situations, we have investigated the recognition of the Gay Games in expectation of finding possibilities of fostering transgender sport engagement. However, FtM transgenders generally seem less informed regarding this event, and MtF transgenders were rather unenthusiastic. This again may be the result of anxieties, or the limited participation in competitive sports as already stated, or a more general tendency in relation to gender norms. Even so, LGBT people and allies overall held high expectancies for the Gay Games, despite the limited recognition. The strong correlation between interest in the Olympics also suggests a possibility of the Gay Games becoming more celebrated as an inclusive realm for non-dichotomous gender. Considering the fact that some were critical about the naming of "Gay" Games, it may be important to invest more in advertising its inclusiveness towards non-gay people, including transgenders and heterosexuals (and possibly also lesbians and bisexuals).

Conclusion

In the current study, we have focused on the sporting participation of LGBT people and allies in relation to the Gay Games as an alternative arena. The overall results, as discussed, show a variety in the experiences and opinions the LGBT community holds against the currently dichotomous sporting environment. Although the approaches differ, it can be said that what the LGBT community expects within sporting

events are: respect for gender identity, recognition of gender/sexual diversity, consideration of inherent physical abilities, and inclusiveness. The number of our samples was quite limited in this research; however, we believe it is insightful in a way that it voiced the current state and possibilities within the LGBT community to a certain extent. In further studies, more in-depth research on the decision-making process of transgender individuals should be focused on analysing the selection of their participating gender division, along with larger-scaled research on people's perceptions on this matter.

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